

Measuring N₂ Pressure Using Cyanobacteria
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The evolution of Earth's atmosphere has been governed by biological evolution. Dinitrogen (N₂) has been a major constituent of Earth's atmosphere throughout the planet's history, yet only a few constraints exist for the partial pressure of N₂ (pN₂). In this study we evaluate two new potential proxies for pN₂: the physical spacing between heterocysts and the isotopic signature of nitrogen fixation in filamentous cyanobacteria. Heterocyst-forming filamentous cyanobacteria are some of the oldest photosynthetic microorganisms on Earth, and debated fossilized specimens have been found in sedimentary rocks as old as 2 Ga. These organisms overcome nitrogen limitation in their aqueous environment through cellular differentiation along their filaments. The specialized cells that develop, known as heterocysts, fix the nitrogen and laterally distribute it to neighboring cells along the filaments. Because the concentration of the dissolved N₂ available to the filaments correlates directly with pN₂, any preservable physiological response of the organism to the changed N₂ availability constitutes a potential proxy for pN₂. In the laboratory, we have examined how pN₂ is reflected in the heterocyst spacing pattern and in the isotopic signature of nitrogen fixation by subjecting the representative species *Anabaena cylindrica* and *Anabaena variabilis* to different N₂ partial pressures during growth at constant temperature and lighting (in media free of combined nitrogen). We show experimentally that the distance between heterocysts and the nitrogen isotope fractionation measured in bulk biomass reflect the pN₂ experienced by *Anabaena cylindrica*. Current work is investigating these responses in *Anabaena variabilis*. When heterocystous cyanobacteria fossilize, these morphological and isotopic signatures should preserve information about pN₂ at that time. Application of this relationship to the rock record may provide a paleoproxy to complement the two existing geobarometers.